Don Mattera
Six poems

F.B.
Introduction

It's easy to look at the strong, pleasing, at once youthful and archaic face of the man Don Mattera and read one kind of South African history there. The exaggerated frontal ridge and apricot-toned skin in which one recognises, with a touch of wonder, the living presence of a prehistoric physiognomy: legacy from his Griqua grandmother whose people, like the Bushmen and Hottentots, were descendants of the ancient Khoisan inhabitants of this part of Southern Africa. The oval dark eyes and big frame that have come from his mother, a Tswana, whose people probably travelled with the Great Rift Valley migrations from tropical Africa hundreds of years ago. The Latin smile and emotional liveliness of expression endowed, along with the surname, by an Italian grandfather.

What is confounding – and will be more so to anyone who has never lived in South Africa – is the immediate and more intimate sociological history of this man, not as a repository of various streams of genes, but as a whole man (and that he is) in relation to the chronology of his life's events. Forget about stages of development as you think of them in conventional progression. Under industrialised colonialism the Shakespearian seven-age schema is disrupted into truly fantastic growths and retardations. The psychological and biological time-tables of tribal life and those imposed by the colonialist-industrialist's idea of a docile and ready-to-hand labour force do not concur.

In black townships, like Sophiatown, where Mattera lived most of the time, childhood is early broken into by squalor, life leaps ahead of books, the white man's reservation of the world of evolving ideas and idealism strictly for himself leaves the young black only one example of attainable ambition: the power of

the gangsters in the streets. Mattera, born in 1935, was a proud father of his first son the year he wrote his matriculation. He had spent his early childhood in various orphanages and continued to practise devoutly the Catholic faith he had learnt there, when he moved – hardly less naturally and grotesquely than a tadpole becoming a frog – from the tutelage of the holy fathers to that of the black township child-gangsters. The same sense of zestful leadership and physical strength served him under both. At 20 he spent nine months awaiting trial on a charge of gang murder; if he was conscious that at least he shared guilt by association, he was confident he would be discharged (and was) and continued to study and to read romantic novels (*Anthony Adverse* was the most favoured) of a distant world where there were great deeds

outside the domain of thuggery. Within the world he knew, the only man he admired who wasn't a gangster was Father Trevor Huddleston, who was not afraid of the black gangsters any more than of the white police, his enemies even though he was a white man, because he was leading the movement to save Sophiatown from being bulldozed to make way for a white township. During the great bus boycotts of the 1950s the cocky young Mattera first hired his gang to the police to board the buses and encourage people to break the boycott, then hired them elsewhere to the African National Congress to deal with boycott scabs. But the question of whether money, the same colour from whosoever hand it came, was the power that would fulfil began to seem doubtful; the intellectual in him, who had lived comfortably enough behind the protection of his fists, writing a little, saw that the hero of the gangs was the biggest dupe of them all, in a social order that could best prevail where black energies were dissipated away from political change. He joined the African National Congress Youth League and received a Marxist-oriented but non-violent, not anti-white political education. He who had moved easily from his black domestic-servant mother's backyard room to his white grandfather's knee began to use his black, his Tswana name – Monnapula Lebakeng. Later he followed the breakaway movement from the ANC, the Pan Africanist Congress, because he found it more radical and less white-influenced than the parent movement. But the labels on the movements were not all that important to him. Although, as a ' coloured ', not a statutory black, he had never had to carry the pass document, he took part in the defiance of pass laws that led to Sharpeville, because he felt by then ' These were my people '.

After the suppression of the great mass black political movements in the early 1960s he turned to welfare work among people of all shades of dark, in particular the teenage gangsters whose psychology he understood. He was a clerk and took a correspondence course in journalism. The establishment in the late sixties of a government-directed mouthpiece for the coloured people, the Coloured People's Representative Council, did not attract him. But he was persuaded to work in the Cape Province for the militantly anti-apartheid Coloured Labour Party, which managed to gain two seats for a vociferous opposition, within the Council itself, to what the Council represents. He became national public relations officer for the Labour Party in 1971; a period of furious public activity and, for the second time in his life, deep politico-philosophical upheaval in private. He was reading the American Black Power writings, the Latin-American Third World radicals, and, most importantly for him, Frantz Fanon. He made contact with the thinking of new black radical groups in South Africa, in particular the student organisation SASO (South African Student Organisation). He formed a radical youth wing of the Coloured Labour Party and tried unsuccessfully to convince the Party as a whole that it should see itself not as a distinct, near-white group but as part of a new black solidarity. In 1973 he left the Coloured Labour Party and joined the Black People's Convention, which represents the attempt of a number of black thinkers and groups in South Africa to present a united front, based for the time being and under present conditions at any rate, not so much on political opposition as what the Convention sees as liberation's rock-bottom: black consciousness and cultural confidence. He was a fearless speech-maker on the big issues of repression and freedom, but he concentrated more and more on working out practical means of making black consciousness something other than another big-word abstraction to ordinary people. He organised dozens of discussion groups and poetry readings in schools and colleges – wherever he and his group of young black writers could help young blacks create their own image in place of the one long imposed by the categories of the white man.

In this same year of 1973, Don Mattera was himself experiencing a burst of creativity, writing poetry and prose, and also was a rising journalist on *The Star*, the biggest daily newspaper in South Africa. In November of that year he was served with a Government Banning Order, valid for five years, that prevents him from working as a reporter, forbids him to be present at gatherings of more than three persons, social or otherwise, and prohibits his addressing public

meetings. He may not publish any of his writings, and his spoken word or opinions may not be quoted. So he becomes the latest addition to the long list of black writers and journalists whose work cannot be read in their own country.

Don Mattera is a man of exceptionally independent mind. Although he supports the dissociation of blacks from multi-racial cultural and political initiatives instituted by radical or liberal whites, to him Black Consciousness is not incompatible with his life-long lack of racial feeling and is synonymous with 'one's own humanity and the necessity that one must assert it *for oneself*'. It is clear that the question of Black Consciousness and the black writer *represents for him* and through him a special problem whose contradictions he insists the writer must assert the right to resolve in his own way, although he knows this will bring him criticism from his own people. The Black Experience, he says, is defined thus: (1) The black man's freedom before the white man came; (2) His captivity by the church; (3) His captivity by white military conquest; (4) His survival and what he must do to liberate himself. Institutionalised Black Consciousness may arrogate to itself the correct direction of the writer in interpreting the Black Experience. But Mattera, accepting the definition, expresses the writer's classic resistance to dogma: 'I'm a spirit-being. As a writer I must be allowed to find my own way to expand Black Consciousness, or whatever gifts I have will die instead of serve.'

Probably George Lukács would have agreed with him; Jean-Paul Sartre would not. □

For a cent

Each morning
corner of Pritchard and Joubert
leaning on a dusty crutch
near a pavement dust-bin
an old man begs
not expecting much.

His spectacles are cracked and dirty
and does not see my black hand
drop a cent into his scurvy palm
but instinctively he mutters:
Thank you my Baas!
Strange, that for a cent
a man can call his brother, Baas.

Protea . . .

The Protea is not a flower
It is a dome of fluttering flags
tombs of Afrikaner relics
and monuments of ox-wagon
dipped in blood
It is the flight of the Blackman's spear
flung in hostile fear
of lost possession
Conquered manhood and broken pride
It is the tears
of my bonded people
falling on Pretoria's marble steps
the victims of subjugation
The Protea can never be a flower
Not while the soul
of South Africa struggles to be set free . . .

No time, Blackman . . .

Stand Blackman
and put that cap
back on your beaten head
Look him in the eye
cold and blue
like the devil's fire
and tell him enough
three centuries is more than you can take, enough

Let him hear it
If he turns his face and sneers
spit and tell him shit
it's all or nothing
He's got all and you have nothing

Don't bargain with oppression
There isn't time man
just no more time
for the Blackman to fool around . . .

Of reason and discovery . . .

I have dispensed with reasoning
It blinded me to many wrongs
nearly robbed me of sanity
I once reasoned with the Whiteman's evil
saw his crimes against my people
his weakness and human folly
God would right the wrong they said
But they did not say when
So I have dispensed with reasoning
for it clouds a Blackman's vision
blunts his wrath and makes him tolerant
of his oppression
I have discovered, yes
the reason for all this hurt
this long deep searching
scanning the godless sky
for the suspended reply
I have discovered, yes
The fault is not in the god nor the pain
but in the sufferer who makes virtue of his anguish
and waits meekly on the god for deliverance
though white scavengers rip flesh
from battered Black bones
I have discovered, yes
the yoke is comfortable
when the belly is full
and there is time to pray for peace
though police guns rattle on mine-dunes
in the name of protection and order
I have discovered, yes
that an ounce of gold
exceeds the value of a Blackman's life
and there is no more time to reason and pray
Yes, I have discovered, yes . . .

And yet . . .

I have known silences
long and deep as death
when the mind questioned the logic
of my frailty
in the imminence of my destruction
by men ruled and ravaged by powerlust

I have known deep silences
when thoughts like angry waves
beat against the shores of my mind
revealing the scars of brutal memories
and the murder of my manhood

and yet
I cannot hate
try as I want to
I cannot hate . . . why?

Departure . . .

I grow tired
and want to leave this city
seething in unrest and injustice
I am leaving
No I have left
Look for me on the banks of the Nile
or under some spreading palm
I shall be sleeping
the sleep of freedom
Do not wake me
leave me to dream
my dream of departure
from a city of seething unrest
void of pity
for I have grown weary
of eating the brine
and long for jungle fruit . . .